

First of its kind:

by Judy L. Strahan

This is the first time the U.S. Army has organized a test platoon to evaluate and assist in fielding a major system.

The need for a new AirLand Battle communications network has long been whispered in the corridors of the Pentagon and echoed by commanders in the battlefield. Two years ago this whisper became a clear, firm voice when the U.S. Army signed a contract with GTE to produce the Mobile Subscriber Equipment (MSE) system.

However, because MSE is a nondevelopmental item (NDI)—or off the shelf—the traditional research and development approach to system acquisition would be too slow. A new approach was needed to get MSE from the drawing board to the battlefield. That new approach included establishing a test cadre solely dedicated to the MSE system acquisition. By October 1985 the MSE Platoon was organized. Located at Fort Huachuca, Ariz., the platoon supports the U.S. Army Operational Test and Evaluation Agency (USAOTEA), the designated operational tester for MSE.

According to 1st Lt. Alex W. Thomson, officer in charge of the MSE Platoon, the French and British military were the first to use a test cadre for system acquisition and fielding. "We just borrowed their idea."

Tactical communications personnel were selected from the Digital Communications System Test Company and Headquarters Company, U.S. Army Electronic Proving Ground, Ft. Huachuca, Ariz. According to Thomson, they "were selected through an extensive screening process that looked at their tactical signal expertise, past test experience, and overall communications knowledge."

MSE is a network that provides voice and data communications support to forces deployed in an AirLand Battle scenario. It will link Army units from battalion to corps level through a highly mobile and



TOP: Sgt. Ellery G. Pizarek (foreground) and Sgt. Debra L. Eggers, both members of the MSE Platoon, are the first U.S. Army soldiers to erect the 9-meter mast which is manufactured by the Swedish firm WIBE for the MSE system. The 9-meter mast is one of the 33 items to be evaluated by the MSE Platoon prior to the MSE FOT&E. **BOTTOM:** Sgt. Eggers and Sgt. Pizarek erect the 9-meter mast and the SHF antenna in 27 minutes while dressed in MOPP-IV gear. (U.S. Army photos)

the MSE Platoon

resilient communications system. When fielding is complete, the MSE network will include active Army, National Guard, and Army Reserve units.

"Not only is MSE a unique system that will revolutionize communications support for commanders in the field," Thomson said, "but the platoon is unique as well. It's the first time the U.S. Army has organized a test platoon to evaluate and assist in fielding a major system. The platoon is also unique in its personnel structure. Signal platoons usually have 60 soldiers in all grades assigned with one officer. But the MSE Platoon has 32 senior NCOs and three officers assigned to carry out its mission, which is to reduce formal testing on MSE without losing the data required to make a valid assessment of its operational effectiveness as a communications system."

The MSE Platoon is responsible for witnessing and reporting on MSE pre-production item development and testing performed by GTE and its subcontractors. This involves tracking and investigating 33 items of evaluation that USAOTEA identified during the source selection process. These activities will take platoon members to subcontractor plants throughout the United States and Europe to attend tests along with representatives from GTE and the Office of the Project Manager for MSE.

The platoon is also responsible for planning the MSE Follow-On Operational Test and Evaluation (FOT&E) to begin at Fort Hood, Texas, in May 1988.

SFC Richard K. Schneider is the MSE Test Section NCOIC. He has several years of past test experience with USAOTEA and sees this current assignment "as the most challenging and important one" he's ever had. Schneider brings 15 years tactical communications experience as a communications-electronics operations chief to the platoon.

"The work we do here with production lead time evaluations and in planning for the FOT&E has far reaching impact on future Army communications," Schneider said, "Every Army communicator in the field wants a say in planning and designing the equipment. This platoon is as close to that reality as you can get."

SFC Raymond A. Honesto, the maintenance NCOIC assigned to the platoon, brings 13 years communications experience as a communications-electronics supervisor to the platoon. He also has worked on previous test and evaluation programs for USAOTEA but finds this current assignment to be his biggest challenge.

"Just the size and scope of this program is mind boggling," said Honesto. "It's going to take dedicated and experienced personnel to field it on time." (MSE should be fielded in about five years, as opposed to the 10 years or more usually required to field a major communications system.)

"MSE will require more technical knowledge of the soldier in the field than ever before," Honesto said. "But it will also provide them with the highest quality communications equipment."

Another MSE member, SSgt. John S. Wilson, brings seven years of tactical communications experience to the platoon. He echoes the sentiments of his co-workers in describing the MSE system.

"Communications in the field has to keep pace with combat units," Wilson said. "MSE will greatly improve a combat unit's overall ability to communicate and will be much easier to operate, move, and set up."

The MSE Platoon is not alone in getting MSE to the field. Other Army agencies actively involved in the production and FOT&E phases of MSE include the Electronics Proving Grounds, the Test and Evaluation Command, the Forces Command, the Training and Doctrine Command, the Army Materiel Command, the Signal Center and School, and the Project Manager for MSE.

"We are all working together to see that MSE makes it to the field in record time," Thomson said. "The dedicated people we have working on the program will see to that."

When MSE is fielded and all the test and evaluation reports have been written, the MSE Platoon will be disbanded. The 35 soldiers who have participated in the testing program will be reassigned to communications activities throughout the Army, bringing their "front-line" experience on this new and revolutionary communications concept to Army commanders the world over.

Ms. Strahan, a former public affairs officer with the recruiting command at Ft. Monmouth, N.J., is currently working on the MSE program for the Operational Test and Evaluation Agency at Ft. Huachuca, Ariz.